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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) can be adapted for use in online instruction. The four basic stages of the NGT (listing, recording, collating, and prioritizing) are described, and modifications for online delivery are detailed, including: (1) the instructor posts the Socratic question or problem to be posed; (2) students go to the site of the question and write brief responses to the problem; (3) students return to the general chat and are divided into small groups to meet in individual chat rooms to share all of their initial responses without dialogue; (4) the instructor/facilitator moves from room to room to insure students stay on task; (5) the students return to general chat, and the facilitator instructs each small group recorder to send an e-mail attachment with all of the group ideas; (6) prior to the next session, the instructor collates the lists and asks students to each choose the five ideas from the compiled list they believe to best address the problem; (7) at the next session, students are divided into small groups and share round-robin fashion their top five choices; (8) the students return to general chat to share and discuss the top three ideas from each group; and (9) the facilitator determines the top five resolutions to the initial problem. (MES)

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Modification of the Nominal Group Activity for On-Line Instruction

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Introduction

With the advent of on-line instruction, there has been a great deal of dialogue amongst university instructional personnel in regard to the effectiveness of this academic tool. One of the greatest concerns has been over the issue of sufficient teacher/student interaction. Some instructors believe that students miss out on much of the substance of the course due to limited dialogue between the student and the instructor. One cause for the limited dialogue or interaction is that of the variance of chat sessions (some do not require chat at all) within the realm of on-line courses.

While some institutions have stringent requirements for either scheduled chat sessions or asynchronous chat (commonly referred to as threaded discussion), others are more flexible in their approach, clearly associating present day on-line instruction to that of the correspondence courses of the past. One could hardly argue against the position that face-to-face instruction is not only more effective, but generally more efficient than the old 'read it, write it, and mail it' schemata of correspondence courses. Another point of consideration is that requirements vary within institutions as to which delivery method

is most effective or necessary for maximum student benefit. Some believe that lecture notes posted to a bulletin board are a very effective manner of delivery while others insist on a rigorous program based primarily on field studies for students, and even others create a mix of lecture, field experiences, chat sessions and threaded discussions.

The typical on-line chat session generally lasts one to one and a half-hours and consists of the instructor beginning the session in a general chat room. Typically, at some point, the instructor would divide the class into smaller groups to be sent to independent chat rooms to discuss a given topic. One common methodology utilized by on line instructors is to pose a Socratic question and act as a facilitator of classroom dialogue.

This type of session can prove to be quite driving and thought provoking. It allows all students to comment on a particular topic without concern of reprisal, which can often be experienced in the live classroom. One of the benefits of the on-line experience is that it seems to foster a 'safe' environment for the otherwise repressed student. However, this methodology used exclusively can become monotonous, not only for the facilitator, but also occasionally for the students, as well.

One alternate method for using the chat session is a modification of the nominal group technique (NGT). The nominal group technique or nominal group activity became a popular method of brainstorming in the mid-to-late 1960's. This activity should be utilized early in the semester to help encourage *all* students' interaction. The atmosphere created early on will produce confidence and enthusiasm for on-line learning throughout the duration of the course.

The Nominal Group Technique

The nominal group technique or nominal group activity is a relatively simple technique. Created in the 1960's to encourage *all* members of a group to contribute individual ideas, thus generating a sense of ownership into the process (Moon, 1999). The NGT is actually a brainstorming technique. However, in the nominal group method, individual group members work independently initially, and eventually their non-redundant ideas are pooled by a moderator (Kramer and Kuo, 1975).

There are four basic stages of the nominal group technique. They are listing, recording, collating and prioritizing (Sarvela, 1991). The activity is begun by presenting a topic for discussion. The topic is addressed through a mini-lecture given by the facilitator on the topic at hand. The lecturer/facilitator then hands out a hard copy of the question/issue to the participants for resolve. The question is read aloud to all participants with no discussion on the topic. The participants are then told they have approximately seven minutes to write every idea that comes to their mind in regard to the topic. They should write their ideas as 2-3 word phrases or bulleted statements. Early reports on the NGT indicated that the technique promoted the identification of the ideas and issues that other group activities might suppress (Chapple and Murphy, 1996).

Participants are then divided into small groups and presented with chart paper on which to record their ideas. They are instructed to give one idea at a time to a recorder, round-robin style, until all ideas in the group have been exhausted. There should be no discussion in regard to the listings and duplicate ideas should be repeated.

The next phase is the discussion and prioritization of items from the small group prior to collation of all ideas from the room. The chart paper with the recorded ideas of

the small groups should be posted so that all members of the small group can easily see the entire list of ideas generated by their group. At this point opportunity is taken for clarification of any ideas that may not be clear to members of the small group. Once all members feel confident they understand all of the bulleted statements, the members are asked to independently rank the top five remarks/statements from their group. A compilation is done for each small group resulting in a priority of the top items for each small group. The top five ideas should then be recorded on fresh chart paper for display for the upcoming large group session.

The next step is taking this small group ranking before the large group. One reporter is selected for each of the small groups. Each group takes a few minutes to discuss the small group selections and the reasoning behind those choices. After a few minutes of discussion, each small group would then be asked to briefly present it's selections and reasonings to the entire group. It will be obvious at this point that many of the ideas generated will have commonalties between the small groups. After this dialogue, participants would again be asked to look over the top ideas from the entire group and rank their priorities in regard to the initial question, based on the feedback from all of the small groups. Selections would be tallied and tabulated for a final consensus.

The result of all of this work is a list of solutions to an issue that has involved a host of resolutions. Also, and perhaps more importantly, a great many individuals that may not have participated had a typical brainstorming session taken place have been actively involved in the resolution process. This activity in full-blown implementation

could easily take several hours and has on many occasions been utilized over an entire day.

Modification of the Technique for On-Line Delivery

With a few minor modifications, the NGT can be an excellent activity early on for the on-line setting. Students should be notified in advance that they will need ancillary materials for the class session. These will include a pencil or pen and paper. Students will also be informed that this activity will be a two-session activity that will begin at the present session and will be concluded the following session.

Prior to the session, the instructor should post the Socratic question or problem to be posed in a 'lesson' area for the student's retrieval later in the class session. Along with the question, simple instructions (such as writing responses in two/three word phrases, etc.) should be listed for the student about the nominal group technique and it's purpose for the session at hand. To begin the session, a Socratic question on the topic at hand (the same one as was posted earlier) should be shared with the class. After a few minutes dialogue by the facilitator with the entire group in general chat, discussion should be stopped. At this point, the question (posted earlier) should be referenced. The instructor should tell the students to go to the site of the question, read the instructions and then return to general chat in exactly seven minutes. Before they are dismissed to go to the question site, they should further be instructed that their responses to the problem/statement should be written in two/three word statements or bulleted statements. They should also be informed that it will be very difficult to think of many ideas after the initial 30-45 seconds. They are to work diligently to remain focused on the topic

question and to write as many ideas as possible regardless of how trite or seemingly irrelevant. The students should then be released to go to the site of the question (with directions) and print the question.

As students return to the general chat (after seven minutes of writing every possible resolution they can think of), they should be divided up into small groups to meet in individual chat rooms. They should be instructed, prior to going to the individual chats that they are to share *all* of their initial responses *without* dialogue until all ideas are exhausted and that a recorder should be selected for each group prior to starting. The students are further instructed to return to general chat after all ideas have been exhausted (and recorded).

The instructor/facilitator should during this time, move from room to room to insure students stay on task, only sharing ideas that have been generated without dialogue. The instructor is also available to answer questions and to ensure the process is moving at an adequate pace.

When the students return to general chat, the facilitator instructs the recorder for each session to send an e-mail attachment with all of the group ideas. The instructor then continues class without reference to specific lists that were generated earlier in the session. The instructor/facilitator comments that the idea list will be posted prior to the next chat with instructions and should be accessed by class members prior to the next session. The instructor then should continue the regular class chat session in whatever manner is customary for the remainder of the session.

Prior to the next chat session, the instructor should collate the lists (taking care to remove repetitive items). Above the list, in an instruction section, the facilitator should

make notice in regard to the host of ideas that were initially generated by the entire group. Further elaboration should be made concerning the fact that having completed the assignment in the traditional method (brainstorming), only a dozen or so ideas, at best, would have been generated. Students are then instructed to choose from the compiled list the five ideas they believe to best address the problem at hand and to bring that list to the next chat session.

At the following chat session, students are again divided into small groups and instructed to select a recorder who will also serve as reporter for the group. The person that served as recorder in the previous week is not allowed to serve again. The students will be given seven minutes in small group chat (longer if deemed necessary by the facilitator) to share round-robin fashion their top five choices. As items are duplicated the recorder so marks. After all selections have been shared, the room recorder will share with the group the top three selections of the small groups. Generally speaking, several of the items will be chosen by more than one group member. In the case of ties, the recorder submits ties, as well. Brief discussion is made by the group as to why the particular selections were good ones, then the group will return to general chat to share ideas with the entire class.

The facilitator will begin the return chat by giving a few brief instructions. Among those instructions would be that momentarily the recorders will share the consensus of their respective groups. All students will be instructed to pencil the top three ideas of all of the small groups. They will further be told that at the end of this segment, they will take this smaller list (of approximately 12-15 ideas) and be asked to select their

final top three ideas. After this instruction and an opportunity for students to ask questions, group recorders will be instructed to begin sharing their top choices.

When all choices have been posted, a short session will follow allowing for clarity of all the ideas that were posted. Students may ask questions in regard to ideas they are uncertain about or may wish to explain items posted by their group. When all dialogue about the postings has ceased, students will then be asked to look over their lists and choose their top three choices. Once again, round robin style (directed by the facilitator), all students will share their choices. The facilitator will write down all of the choices, marking all duplicates. At the end, the facilitator will share the top five resolutions to the initial problem with the group. This step could be eliminated (if class time is short) by having individual students e-mail the instructor their three top choices at a later time, the facilitator could assemble a final list of resolutions and post on a 'lesson' site. Finally the facilitator will remind the students of the increased number of possible solutions that were initially presented and how much more individual input was generated through this process.

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